

to your

Health!

"Promoting Good Health Through Information"

Veterans Affairs Palo Alto Health Care System • Patient Education Newsletter • Summer 2003

Women & Heart Disease

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To all women or anyone who loves a woman ...

Did you know that heart disease is the leading cause of death in women in the United States? In fact, it takes the lives of more women each year than stroke, breast cancer, cancer of the ovaries and uterus, and HIV combined.

Despite this, most people do not think of heart disease as being a serious problem for women. Symptoms of heart disease in women are usually more vague than the "classic" chest pain that men seem to experience, and many doctors fail to recognize the warning signs in their female patients.



Symptoms

The classic symptoms of heart disease and heart attack are tightness or heavy pressure in the chest, arm pain, and shortness of breath. Listed below are the symptoms that might indicate heart disease in *women*:

- nausea/indigestion
- shortness of breath
- dizziness
- pain in arms
- overwhelming fatigue
- trouble sleeping
- anxiety
- neck or jaw pain

(continued on page 3)

Recipe for Health

Summer Vegetable Spaghetti

This lively vegetarian pasta dish contains no added fat or oil, is low in cholesterol, and is good hot or cold.

2 C	small yellow onions, cut in eighths
2 C	chopped, peeled, fresh, ripe tomatoes (~1 lb)
2 C	thinly sliced yellow and green squash (~1 lb)
1-1/2 C	cut fresh green beans (~1/2 lb)
2/3 C	water
2 Tbsp	minced fresh parsley
1 clove	garlic, minced
1/2 tsp	chili powder
1/4 tsp	salt
to taste	black pepper
1 can	tomato paste (6 oz)
1 lb	uncooked spaghetti
1/2 C	grated parmesan cheese

1. Combine first 10 ingredients in large saucepan; cook for 10 minutes, then stir in tomato paste. Cover and cook gently, 15 minutes, stirring occasionally until vegetables are tender.
2. Cook spaghetti in unsalted water according to package directions.
3. Spoon sauce over drained hot spaghetti and sprinkle parmesan cheese over top.

Yield: 9 servings

Serving Size: 1 cup spaghetti & 3/4 cup sauce with vegetables

Each serving provides: 279 calories, 3 g total fat, 1 g saturated fat, 4 mg cholesterol, 173 mg sodium

From <http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov>

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

Coping with Stress	2
Headache Trivia	2
Unplanned Weight Loss	3
Headache Trivia Answers	3

Visit our new patient education website at
<http://www.palo-alto.med.va.gov/patienteducation/patienteducation.htm>

Coping with Stress

Laura Peters, Ph.D.

What is "Stress"?

Stress can be defined as our physical and emotional reactions to the world around us. Changes we encounter, good or bad, can create a stress reaction in the body and mind. For example, a vacation can be stressful in terms of coping with airport security, strange places, financial difficulties, and perhaps a foreign language. Major illness, loss of a loved one, and financial problems are examples of negative changes that can create stress.

What happens physically when we are stressed?

Physically we experience increased heart rate, breathing rate, and perspiration. Levels of blood sugar increase for energy, muscles tense, our digestion slows, and we feel tired. We also have a greater possibility of getting sick.

What happens mentally when we are stressed?

Mentally we may feel nervous, on edge, or overwhelmed. We may have poor concentration and feel depressed.

What can we do to combat stress?

The important thing about a stress reaction is to recognize when it is happening so that you can take some action before you feel completely burned out. Once you recognize that you are stressed, you can do something about it. There are physical, mental, and behavioral ways to deal with stress.

One thing to keep in mind is that we don't always have control over factors that cause stress. National security, terrorism, war, budget cuts, transportation problems,

weather, and natural disasters are out of our control. However, it is important to remember things we do have control over. We have some control over how we react to stress. Plan enough positives to balance out the negatives in life.

What are some physical ways to deal with stress?

- Regular exercise is a great stress-reliever. Exercise clears the mind and decreases tension in the body. It gives us a break to regroup. Our problems do not seem so impossible after exercise.
- Good nutrition strengthens the body's ability to cope with stress.
- Minimize intake of caffeine, nicotine, alcohol, and drugs to help reduce stress.
- Extra sleep during a stressful time helps keep our bodies from becoming rundown.

What are some mental ways to deal with stress?

- Our view of a situation can make a big difference between feeling stressed and feeling like we can handle it. If you say to yourself, *"This is the end of the world,"* when something bad happens, it will cause more stress. If you can coach yourself through bad situations by thinking of positive actions you can take, this will help reduce your stress. For example, try telling yourself, *"I can handle this... Just take it a step at a time... What is the first thing I need to do? I have gone through bad situations before, I can get through this one too."*

(continued on page 3)

National Headache Awareness Week is in June!!!

Test your brain power on headache trivia!

- T F** 1. Headaches are not serious and do not require prompt medical attention.
- T F** 2. Migraine headaches affect men more often than women.
- T F** 3. Migraine headaches are a genetic disorder.
- T F** 4. Migraine headaches can be triggered by certain environmental factors.
- T F** 5. The onset of a migraine is unpredictable.



(answers on page 4)

Women and Heart Disease (continued from page 1)

Because these symptoms can also be caused by many other illnesses, they may be misdiagnosed. In addition, women often do not develop symptoms until their heart disease is advanced. Therefore, if a woman really does have heart disease, there may be a crucial delay in correct diagnosis and start of treatment.

Risk Factors

How is a woman supposed to know if she has or is likely to develop heart disease, especially when her symptoms can be so vague and late in coming? The first thing she should do is look at the "risk factors" for heart disease (listed below), and count up how many apply to her:

- family history of heart disease or stroke
- over 55 years of age
- smoking
- birth control pills + smoking
- high blood pressure greater than 135/85
- high total cholesterol greater than 240 mg/dl ■

Unplanned Weight Loss

Eileen Stein, RD



Have you lost weight?

For some people, losing weight is a desirable attribute. However, for others, losing weight is an undesirable sign of a health problem. Many people, as they get older, have more difficulty either gaining weight or preventing weight loss. It is a serious concern, especially if the reason for the weight loss is not known.

How much is too much?

Generally, if you have lost more than 10% of your usual weight in the past 6 months, you should let your provider know. For example, if you usually weigh 150 pounds, a loss of greater than 15 pounds should be reported to your provider. However, any weight loss that is concerning to you should be reported.

What causes weight loss?

Simply put, not eating enough calories will cause you to lose weight. The reasons why are varied. It may be related to a decrease in your sense of taste or smell, a loss of appetite, a medical condition or treatment for a condition, loneliness or depression, or just a lack of interest in food.

What about supplements?

Nutritional supplements (like Ensure, Boost, or Instant Breakfast) can be a convenient way to add calories and protein to your diet. However, they should



not take the place of regular meals. You should try to increase your intake of foods as much as possible. Use the supplements to add to your diet, or as a meal replacement if you have to miss a meal. Milkshakes and smoothies, either homemade or store-bought, are often just as effective as commercial supplements.

What can you do?

Some suggestions to help you increase your intake:

1. Eat more often! If you normally skip meals, DON'T! You don't have to eat a large quantity of food at a time; in fact, most people with a poor appetite find large meals unappealing. However, eating small meals and snacks regularly throughout the day can help boost your overall intake.
2. Choose foods and drinks that are concentrated sources of calories. For example:
 - Try fruit juice, cocoa, milk or a milkshake in place of water, coffee or tea
 - Add dried fruit or nuts to cold or hot cereal
 - Add avocado to salads or sandwiches
 - Spread crackers or bread with cream cheese, peanut butter, or honey
 - Add grated cheese to soups or salads, slice or melt cheese on a sandwich
 - Add butter, margarine or sour cream to potatoes, rice, noodles and vegetables ■



Stress *(continued from page 2)*

- Imagine being in a peaceful, soothing place. This can take the edge off of a stressful situation.
- Turn off the chatter of talk radio and turn on some relaxing tunes.
- Try not to replay your misfortunes over and over. Do what you can about the situation and let go of your misfortunes.
- Try building more relationships. Research indicates that as people go through life, those who are more socially active are typically happier and healthier.
- Pets are a great source of unconditional love!
- Spirituality is also an answer to stress. Try connecting with something greater than yourself.
- Engage in enough pleasant activities to balance out the negatives in your life. Call a friend, enjoy nature, go for a walk, join organizations or clubs or volunteer to help others. These can all bring pleasure to life.

Behavioral tips for beating stress include taking a 5-minute

break from activities to stretch, walk, and relax. Learning to say “no” to some people and projects can decrease stress. Remember that you can't be all things to all people. Try using deep breathing when stressed to release tension. Breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth and let go of tension in your body. Taking a few deep breaths can help calm you down in a difficult situation and allow you to think. Try recording your thoughts in a journal or on a tape recorder to release hostility or tension. Sometimes this helps you to get a different perspective on a situation. Adjust your attitude and try thinking of three things daily you are thankful for.

If these techniques are not helping you, then it is time to seek professional help. Talk to your primary care provider who may refer you for medications or counseling. Support can be found through VA support groups, community centers, mental health clinics, senior centers, and religious leaders. The idea is to reach out when the going gets too tough. ■

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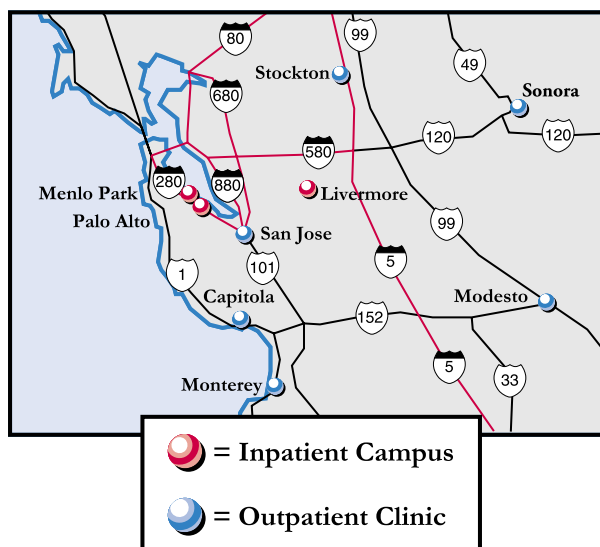
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World Wide Web Address:
www.palo-alto.med.va.gov



Hepatitis C Support Group

at VA Palo Alto, Menlo Park,
or Monterey, contact
Barbara Cunningham, RN, at
650-493-5000, ext 60281

Questions or Comments?

If you have any questions or topics you would like addressed in "To Your Health" feel free to send in your request via postal mail or e-mail to:

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Answers to Headache Trivia *(from page 2)*

1. **False.** Not *all* headaches require medical attention. However, some types of headaches are signals of more serious problems and do call for prompt medical care. Sudden, severe headaches with or without a stiff neck or headaches with fever, convulsions, confusion, or pain in the eye or ear should be reported to your provider. Also seek medical attention if your headache follows a blow on the head or is accompanied by loss of consciousness. A persistent headache in someone who previously never had headaches should also be reported.
2. **False.** Migraine headaches occur more often in women. Greater than 75% of the 28 million Americans affected by migraine headaches are women.
3. **True.** Migraines have been shown to be a genetic disorder. Abnormal genes that affect regulation of blood vessels have been identified in some forms of migraines.
4. **True.** Migraines are frequently triggered by stress, glaring or flickering lights, changes in weather, and certain foods. Foods such as yogurt, nuts, and lima beans can cause painful migraines.
5. **False.** Some individuals can predict the onset of a migraine with visual disturbances, including flashing lights, or zigzag lines, or temporary loss of vision. ■

National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke